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SUBJECT: German State Pioneers Islamic Instruction in the Schools

¶1. Summary: In 2006 the southern German state of Baden Wuerttemberg became the first state in Germany to offer Islam, alongside Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, as a subject for religious instruction in some public schools, reflecting the state's recognition of Islam's place in society and allowing Muslim school children to receive the same type of religious instruction as their non-Muslim peers. Baden-Wuerttemberg continues to train more primary school teachers to expand the program, while other states look to B-W as a model for creating their own Islamic studies programs. The Muslim community has slowly overcome its skepticism of teaching Islam outside the mosque, recognizing that public Islamic education is a potent symbol of the religion's equal standing in society. End Summary.

A Pilot Islamic Education Program

¶2. Islamic instruction courses are currently offered in 12 public schools across Baden-Wuerttemberg for children ages six to 10. The classes offer a way for Muslim children, with their parents' permission, to learn about their religion in courses similar to ones offered to Christian and Jewish children, which have been a part of the German public school system since the end of the World War II. Since the program was created, the Stuttgart Pedagogic University has designed an Islam instruction course and implemented teacher training. Teachers must be Muslim, and must teach other subjects in addition to Islamic instruction.

¶3. Religious instruction in German public schools is considered an expression of religious freedom, and is typically organized by religious communities that have public law corporation status. Since no one Muslim organization has been recognized as representing the Muslim community writ large, no Islamic entity has public law corporation status. This has hindered the development of Islamic instruction in Germany. In Baden-Wuerttemberg alone there are more than 30 Muslim organizations, none of which speaks for the whole community.

¶4. Baden-Wuerttemberg has overcome this hurdle, at least temporarily, by taking on the role usually played by the religious public bodies, including establishing teacher qualification requirements and designing curricula. Many mosques were reportedly initially skeptical of public religious instruction, arguing that Koranic instruction should be offered in the mosque in the native language of the minority group, not in German as is the case in Baden Wuerttemberg public schools. In addition, the Baden Wuerttemberg program offers Islamic instruction only in elementary schools, whereas instruction in other religions is offered through graduation. Expanding Islamic instruction to secondary schools would require a greater number of teachers and types of instruction. In 2010, Baden Wuerttemberg will be required to find a counterpart in the Islamic religious community to take over the responsibility of continuing the Islamic education program.

Islamic Education as a Force of Integration

¶5. The lack of Islamic education in German schools is another symbol of Islam's outlier status in German society. While their Catholic, Protestant and Jewish peers attend religious instruction

as part of their normal curriculum, the ever-growing number of Muslim students must attend other non-religious classes during this part of the school day. One university student taking an Islamic instruction course at the Ludwigsburg Teacher Training College explained his motivations for wanting to teach Islam to PolOff and PolSpec, saying that his Koranic instruction as a child in the mosque had been based on memorization and recitation. He learned about Islam from an imam who spoke no German and lived in Germany for only a few years before returning to Turkey. He hoped to teach Islam in German in a way that was practical and relevant to students with a future in modern German society. Pol Off and Pol Spec briefly attended a class at the college where a Moroccan imam resident in Germany gave an analytical lecture in German on teaching children the story of how the texts of the Koran were gathered into one book.

¶6. The organizers of the teacher training at the college reported that leaders of the largest mosques in Stuttgart are now more in favor of the pilot project, having seen its tangible benefits, and are now encouraging parents to send their children to the classes. For the mosques, the project not only offers an additional platform for young Muslims to learn about their identity, but it puts Islam on equal footing with other religions in the public forum. Non-Muslim students also learn to understand and accept Islam as Muslim students educate the broader student body through holiday and other activities. The success of the program has prompted the neighboring state of Rheinland-Pfalz to allow its teachers to train in Islamic education in Baden-Wuerttemberg's small program. Hesse and Saarland have as yet been unable to overcome the challenge of finding a Muslim organization to act as a counterpart.

¶7. COMMENT: Islamic education has fostered integration in

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Baden-Wuerttemberg by bringing Islam out of the mosque, where few non-Muslims go, into the public school system. The classes raise awareness about Islam and put the religion on more equal footing with religions having deeper roots in Germany. Significant hurdles remain, as the state still must grapple with the challenge of having no proper counterpart in the Muslim community with which to coordinate its efforts beyond the year 2010. END COMMENT.

¶8. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
POWELL